

BOYNTON CHAPEL
(Bjorklunden Chapel)
7590 Boynton Lane
Baileys Harbor
Door
Wisconsin

HABS WI-375
WI-375

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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BOYNTON CHAPEL

HABS No. WI-375

Location: Baileys Harbor, Door County, Wisconsin.

Significance: Located on the northern shores of Lake Michigan, in the state of Wisconsin, is an isolated retreat center with a small, Scandinavian inspired chapel - Boynton Chapel. It was conceived of and built in the 1930s by a Chicago immigrant couple who had no training in architecture or construction. This small, unusual chapel exists today as a profound, and highly personal, attempt to combine architecture and nature in a simple, transcendent spiritual relationship.

Description: Nestled among the great white pines and focused on the sandy beach and clear water of Lake Michigan to the east, the chapel was constructed to serve as a place of emotional retreat. As the desire to reconnect with the spiritual world became a strong urge, Winfred Boynton conceived of this small, wood chapel. Her exhaustive search for truth and meaning in both religion and architecture brought her to this unusual 'stavkirka' type. Within its tranquil setting, the chapel remains as an inspired attempt to escape the complexities of urban life.

Door County, the location of Boynton Chapel, is the distinctive 'fingerlike' peninsula of Wisconsin that extends northeast into Lake Michigan. The long, narrow land mass stretches 85 miles north from its land connection at the port city of Green Bay. Because of the 'dead end' aspect of the peninsula form, it has functioned more as a destination, and not as a land passage to other locations. This fact has helped it retain its isolated feel and has slowed the environmentally destructive aspects of urbanization. Beyond the predictable visual elements of modernization, the area, in general, still retains much of its original isolated feel. Bjorklunden retreat is on the easterly edge of Door County, where turbulent Lake Michigan waters and unprotected shipping lanes have lead to relatively few major port city developments.

As with churches of this type, the floor plan is a simple crucifix form, its footprint is 22' x 34'. The volumetric shape, however, is more complex with its stepped profile and articulated surfaces. The semicircular apse at the west end serves as a visual softening that contrasts the more rigid rectilinear forms of the walls and roofs. Though small and compact, it projects a size that appears quite larger. The stavkirke type, with its gradual 'pyramidal' descending roof forms, seems monumental yet comfortable in this setting. And, while the massing projects a sense of height, the finely carved wood details of the eaves, ridge boards, porch and cupola elements, and window and door surrounds offer a smaller scale of detail that seems consistent with the surrounding natural growth.

The building foundation takes advantage of the local geological profile of limestone bedrock near the ground surface by providing only a shallow, unfinished basement space. Basement walls, footings and floor are of rough-cut limestone. Above the basement level, the entire building is wood framed, with exterior surfaces of vertical cedar siding and hand-split cedar roof shingles in a diamond pattern. The entry porch and bell cupola are entirely carved redwood timber. The single entry door and five small windows are decorated with carved wood casings of local wildlife characters. The interior walls and ceiling are of traditional lime plaster with painted decorative, biblical scenes. The pews, baptismal, pulpit and alter are hand-carved redwood, completed, almost entirely, by Winifred and Donald Boynton.

History: Northern Wisconsin has long been an escape for the growing populations of Midwestern states and cities. While dense populated areas are well south and east of these northerly United States limits, the distance has been a reasonable commute, particularly at the advent of the automobile era. That geographic and historic reality, combined with scenic terrain and a natural abundance of fish, wildlife and freshwater, have historically positioned northern Wisconsin as an appealing destination. In particular, residents of Chicago have found it to be accessible yet isolated.

The decision to build a Norwegian chapel may be traced, in part, to Winifred Boynton's Norwegian ancestry and to her religious background. Both her grandfather and brother were clergymen. But for many years, her religious affiliations were changing and difficult. She was, at various times, a Congregationalist, a Presbyterian, and an Episcopalian. After several family tragedies, she emerged with a determination to build a chapel expressed in eclectic and universalist religious sensibility, drawing not only on the Christian tradition but on the symbols and insights of many world religions. Seclusion, nature, natural local building materials, pioneer spirit, search for truth and harmony, religious tradition and iconography - all come together in this place. The architecture of the 'stavkirke' exhibits this partnership of coexistence. Additionally, the integral wood construction allows for carvings of traditional religious iconography as well as local wildlife, flora and fauna.

Winifred and Donald Boynton, lacking any formal training in craftsmanship, conceived and built entirely by hand this 15th Century Norwegian Chapel on their summer estate, Bjorklunden Vid Sjon (Birch Forest by the Water), in Door County, Wisconsin. The chapel was handcrafted by the Boyntons during several summers starting in the mid 1930s. The inspiration for the architecture of the chapel, which follows the Scandinavian forms of the earlier buildings at Bjorklunden, was a wood chapel (a Stavkirke) which she saw beside a lake in Lillehammer, Norway, in 1932.

Designed and built in the early part of the twentieth century, today it exists as an architectural anomaly. At a time when international modernism was sub-planting traditional historic styles, this small Scandinavian chapel resisted academic abstraction. The decision to employ European architectural traditionalism was not only for emotional comfort but also for the religious innovation that the stavkirke style represented. As a very early Christian religious type, its innocent, wood dominated features established an important visual presence in a largely pagan and isolated northern European setting. Though many centuries removed from its typological origins, it still retains that early spiritual adventurism and sense of the frontier.

In the 1920s, at the time that Boynton Chapel was conceived, technological and architectural innovation dominated. The hopeful spirit of science touched all levels of human existence. Nonetheless, it was also a time of international conflict. The world was recovering from the tragedy of World War I, yet poised to engage in an even more extensive mortal conflict. Within that dynamic sense of uncertainty and discomfort, humble attempts were made to recapture a time of emotional and physical harmony. The 420 acre retreat center of Bjorklunden, and specifically the Boynton Chapel, is an important existing example of that cultural urge. It was meant to be a place to counterbalance the emotional stress of accelerated urban growth and international tension of the time.

Over the decades, new social conflicts have sub-planted earlier ones, yet the chapel retains its original and important function as an emotional retreat. Physically, this small wood chapel has most of its original architectural features, despite the rough winter conditions. Documentation of this simple building has become particularly important as the original Scandinavian wood residence building on the campus was destroyed by fire. While lightening strikes are a constant threat, the extreme weather conditions have also contributed to the gradual deterioration of these delicate wood buildings. An important and unique example of personal determination in the face of monumental international events exists at Bjorklunden and with Boynton Chapel.

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